

[Shoe Laster of Lynn #1]

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The following notes were taken from an interview with Elmer Robinson, elderly laster who was also for a number of years, a business agent for the laster's union. He lives at a convalescent home, 101 Nahant St., Lynn. He is of Yankee stock, was born in Maine, and came to Lynn when he was twenty-one years of age. Mass. 1938-9

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Name—Jane K. Leary

Subject-Shoe Laster of Lynn

Informant-Elmer Robinson

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A little questioning led Mr. Robinson to tell me something of his days when he traveled as organizer for the laster's union.

"I went to a little town in Indiana and I was warned before I went there that it was a tough town to go into. Well, as soon as I registered at the hotel there, I decided to go out and get a shave. When I got in the chair I asked the barber is this was a union shop. The man looked at me suspiciously, while he waved the shaving knife dangerously near my throat.

"don't cut my throat' I yelled him, before I realized that the man was a friend, not foe. 'sh- Sh' responded the barber, 'don't tell any one in this town, that you are a union man. They run 'em out of town. I'm one too, but no one knows it.' He showed me his union card, further urging me not to let any one else know in town that I was a union man, and not on my life to let it be known that I was an organizer.

"When I went back to the hotel, I was followed to the desk by an impressive looking gentlemen. 'Are you Mr. Robinson?' he asked me.

"I'm Robinson', I said. 'I don't know about the mister! (I always hated to be called Mister and a lot of folks used to call me that, just to tease me, I guess) What can I do for you?'

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"Mr. Robinson,' said my new found friend, whom I afterwards found to be a member of the Citizen's Alliance of that town,' there's a train out of this town in just five minutes. If you hurry you can make it, and I advise you to hurry.'

"I got a little business to do in this town. If I hadn't met you, it would have taken just about a half hour. But you make me want to stay. Now I got money in the safe in this hotel and

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I'm registered for a room. I'm gonna eat my dinner here and maybe I'll stay all night. And I got a telegram that that's all set to go on the wires just in case any thing happens to me. Understand?

"When I went into the dining room to eat my meal I was put way over in the corner of the room by myself, just as if I would contaminate the others in the room if I was settin' near 'em. But I didn't pay any attention and after I finished my meal I went out to see what trouble the union had got itself into there. I found they were responsible for it themselves.

"Well, I never was one, to take the part of the union if it was in the wrong, so I went back to that fellow at the hotel and told him the union had been wrong, that in this instance the citizens of the town were right.

"Well, they was surprised. They didn't expect me to say anything like that. That evening they asked me to attend a meeting of the Citizen's Alliance and I learned a lot there. The unions were not always right in their fights in those early days.

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"But often — in most places — the manufacturers tied things up so, that the workers didn't have a chance. One of the most vicious manufacturers organizations that ever existed, was in ————, the town that I grew up in in Maine. There a person couldn't get a job, unless he had a permit from the Citizen's Alliance and one from the manufacturer he worked for before he got this new job. They had things all sewed up there.

"I did a lot of organizing work in Lynn. I organized the 'girls' (stitchers). Most people said it couldn't be done, that they wan't won't work or hold together. But I made their organization stick.

"And I organized the first sit down strike in the country. That was in Lynn. I'll tell you more about that the next time you come.

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"I was twenty-one years old when I came to Lynn. I was born down east in Maine, but I haven't got much use for the people down there. They don't come no narrower. I coulda told ahead of time that there'd be trouble up there for Henry and them that's in jail there now, the way the judges and the lawyers and the people are set against a new idea.

"When I was four years old, my mother died. I just come up myself. I had a sister younger'n me. She's livin' in Lynn today for as soon as I could after I got settled 4 here, I brought her down too.

"I met all kinds of people in my time, all races and of all religions. I've come to the conclusion it don't matter what race ya are, or what religion ya hold to. The important thing is what sorta person are ya. Ya can't help who your parents are nor much, what ya believe, but ya can help what ya make of yourself."